

Hundreds Attend Conference on Reducing Gang Activity

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"We know this phenomenon is affecting everybody in every community in the country and there is no one agency that's going to be successful in combatting this thing."

Ed Cohn, executive director of the National Major Gang Task Force.

Efforts and strategies to combat gang activity brought hundreds of law enforcement, prison officials, judges and others from 27 states and Puerto Rico to a three-day conference that began here Monday.

"We know this phenomenon is affecting everybody in every community in the country and there is no one agency that's going to be successful in combatting this thing," said Ed Cohn, executive director of the National Major Gang Task Force.

Participants in the Indianapolis-based group's 12th annual conference planned to discuss several topics, including identifying gang rivalries, far-right terrorist organizations, white supremacists, gang prevention and prosecution. Also on the agenda are specific gangs such as United Blood Nation and MS-13, as well as tattoo identification.

Gangs once only roamed the streets of big cities, but they now can be found in 2,500 U.S. communities, according to the FBI.

Cohn said his group surveyed prisons and 30 of the nation's largest county jails two years ago and identified offenders affiliated with 1,625 gangs. That was up from 140 gangs in a similar survey done in the mid-1980s, he said.

Cohn said there was no firm number on how many people were in gangs, but he said it had to be in the hundreds of thousands.

Indiana State Police Superintendent Paul Whitesell said Indiana's gang activity was much like that found

elsewhere in the nation. He said there was only so much police could do to prevent youth from joining gangs, so most police involvement is a response to gang activity.

"In the last 15 years we've seen a great more gang influence in the outlying county areas _ any place where you have idle time and a lack of other places to put your directions and energies," Whitesell said. "You're always going to have folks who are at some level vulnerable to those who would offer something quick and exciting."

Marion County Sheriff Frank Anderson said many youth join gangs because "it's an artificial family of sorts," and it was a cultural and community problem. He said neighbors should report gang activity to authorities, and there should be more faith-based initiatives aimed at the problem.

David Donahue, commissioner for the Indiana Department of Correction, said youth who get involved in gangs largely want to be "something bigger than themselves early on." He said the department tries to change the behavior of young gang members in DOC custody.

Many adult gang members in prison want to leave gang life behind, but once they are released, he said many are tempted to return to the fold of the black market gangs that had been their only "employer."

Indiana Supreme Court Justice Randall Shepard said that from a judicial standpoint, judges now have more options sentencing gang members than they did 15 years ago. Back then, he said, judges essentially had two choices in sentencing juvenile gang members _ probation or incarceration.

But he said there are now more community corrections programs and improvements in the probation system have provided other alternatives. Better connections between law enforcement, the judiciary, social workers and educators have also improved the support system, Shepard said.

"They are much more calibrated to change that individual's behavior," he said. "It's a much better situation and probably one the public hasn't noticed."

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.